DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 926 CS 507 390

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TITLE Listening: The Neglected Language Art.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Communication Skills; *Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Individual Development; *Listening; *Listening Skills; Literacy; *Public Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Listening Strategies; Listening Theory

ABSTRACT

A number of educators have expressed concern over the poor quality of listening skills exhibited by United States public school students. Furthermore, there is concern regarding "automaticity," or "passive" listening, which involves the perception of sounds without understanding. Not until a 1978 amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was listening (along with speaking) added to reading, writing, and arithmetic as a determinant of literacy and basic competency. Professional research and literature suggest that listening continues to be a neglected skill. To improve the teaching of listening in schools, it has been suggested that children be trained in three ways: (1) to concentrate on body language and gestures to enhance attention; (2) to practice techniques to overcome negative attitudes toward listening; and (3) to learn to identify important aspects of a speaker's material. Children should be involved in listening exercises and real-life experiences. Students can be presented with situations in which they must listen and understand to perform a task. Listening programs must be integrated as a vital part of language arts in all content areas in a similar way to reading. This will incorporate listening as a major communication skill in all facets of learning. (Two figures and one table are included; 16 references are attached.) (SG)

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LISTENING: THE NEGLECTED LANGUAGE ART

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March, 1991

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Background to the Problem

A number of educators have expressed concern over the poor quality of listening skills exhibited by students in U.S. public schools (Bozic, 1983; Burley-Allen, 1982; Northcroft, 1984; Samuels, 1984; Swanson, 1990). One of the problems is that many students today are exposed to massive 'doses' of television viewing where listening is passive and is relegated to a minor supporting role. A recent Neilson Media Research survey estimated that U.S. children between the ages of 5 to 12 years are watching television for 4 to 6 hours a day, compared to 1 hour a day reading and 30 minutes a week playing sport (Mernit, 1990).

Another problem with listening is that it suffers from what Swanson (1989) termed 'automaticity'. That is we are hearing things continuously throughout our waking hours but only listening to a select number and auding only a very few. Swanson (1990) describes hearing as an involuntary, physical action where the individual is aware of sounds but not interested in understanding them. An example of hearing would be during a busy shopping excursion where a myriad of sounds would be heard but not concentrated on. (This is also described as 'passive' listening).

Listening is when we make a mental effort to differentiate the different auditory signals we are exposed to each day and auding (or 'active' listening) is when we understand the specific sounds and comprehend their message.

The Neglect

The neglect that listening as a skill has endured is illustrated by the fact that it wasn't until the 1978 US Public Law 95-561 amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that listening (and speaking) were added to reading, writing and arithmetic as determinants of literacy and needed basic competencies (West, 1983). Seven years later, a survey reported that 33 U.S. states had started to incorporate the teaching of listening skills into their public schools (Van Rheenen, 1985).

However, a survey by Swanson (1986) stated that an analysis of 15 textbooks used in teacher education programs dealing with communication skills, mentioned listening on only 82 pages out of a total of 3,704.

In a similar vein, a recent report by the Pennsylvania Department of Education entitled, "The Pennsylvania Framework for Reading, Writing and Talking Across the Curriculum", mentioned listening as a skill very rarely and appeared to include listening as an aspect of talking (Lytle and Botel, 1990). The importance of listening in classroom instruction, however, was emphasized in 1982, when the Illinois State Board of Education estimated that:

45% of classroom instruction was devoted to listening.
20% of classroom instruction was devoted to talking.
15% of classroom instruction was devoted to reading.
10% of classroom instruction was devoted to writing.

An analysis of E.R.I.C. documents during the period 1966-1991 is shown in Table 1 and illustrates the relatively small number of citations on listening in the total number of language arts entries.

Table 1. Number or E.R.I.C. Citations in Each of the Language Arts During the Period 1/66 to 3/91.				
Language Arts	1/66 - 12/75	1/76 - 12/82	1/83 - 3/91	Totals
Reading	18,520	21,602	21,990	62,112
Writing	6,747	10,961	17,328	35,036
Speaking/ Talking*	3,785	4,846	5,752	14,383
Listening	2,352	2,538	2,938	7,828
Totals	31,404	39,947	48,008	119,359

* E.R.I.C. entries in Speaking/Talking for the three periods were as follows:

3464/321 (11/66 - 12/75); 4406/440 (1/76 - 12/82); 5071/681 (1/83 - 3/91).

The total citations in E.R.I.C. up to December, 1991, equalled 727,870 (315,239 R.I.E. and 412,631 C.I.J.E.) with an estimated increase of between 2,600-3,000 documents per month. Thus by March, 1991, the E.R.I.C. total would be approximately 736,000 documents. Of this total, the language arts represented 16%, with reading accounting for nearly 53% of the language arts entries and listening 6.6%. However, in real terms, listening as a percentage of the language arts total has declined from 7.6% in 1966-75 to 6.6% in 1983-91.

Possible Solutions

A variety of strategies have been suggested to improve the teaching of listening in schools. Swanson (1984) suggested that children should be trained in three ways: to concentrate on the speaker's body language and gestures to enhance attention; to practice techniques designed to overcome a negative attitude to listening; and to learn to identify the most important aspects in the speaker's material. One of the best ways to practice this latter listening skill is to rule a line down the middle of a sheet of note paper and place the speaker's main ideas on the left side and supporting details on the right side. The resulting summary then represents the most important elements of the speaker's material (Edwards, 1989). Funk and Funk (1989) stated that children should be trained to listen for a message and not merely listen to someone or something. Teachers should provide a purpose for listening, prepare children for listening activities, provide follow-up experiences and inculcate positive listening habits.

Most current researchers stress the importance of involving children actively in listening exercises and real-life experiences. Murray and Swartz (1989) offered several excellent suggestions in this regard including using students as editors, observer-participants, communication-journalists and creators in a variety of listening activities.

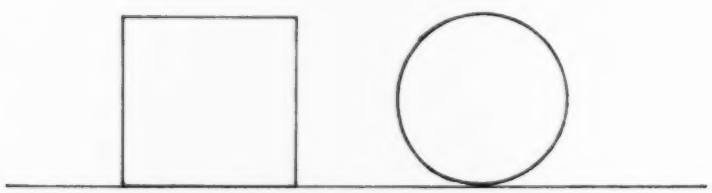
Another productive way of developing 'active' listening as distinct from 'passive' listening is to construct a learning situation where the child has to listen and understand a message in order to solve a problem or perform a task. This type of activity instructs children, either singly or as a small group, to listen to a series of directions and determine, in their minds, where they would be located at the end of the message. For example, they may have been told to go to a certain location in their school or their local community (Funk and Funk, 1989). A variation of this problem-solving activity, asks the student to follow the spoken directions on a map or chart and mark their destination at the end of the message.

A popular listening activity for young children asks them to draw certain basic shapes and combinations of shapes in various colors on a worksheet. For example, the child may be told to, "Draw a red square inside a yellow circle in the first box on the page."

For older children, an excellent listening exercise places two children back-to-back and designates one as the speaker and the other as the listener. The speaker then describes a diagram consisting of a number of geometric shapes. The listener must concentrate on what is being said and reproduce (draw) the diagram, exactly as it is described by the speaker.

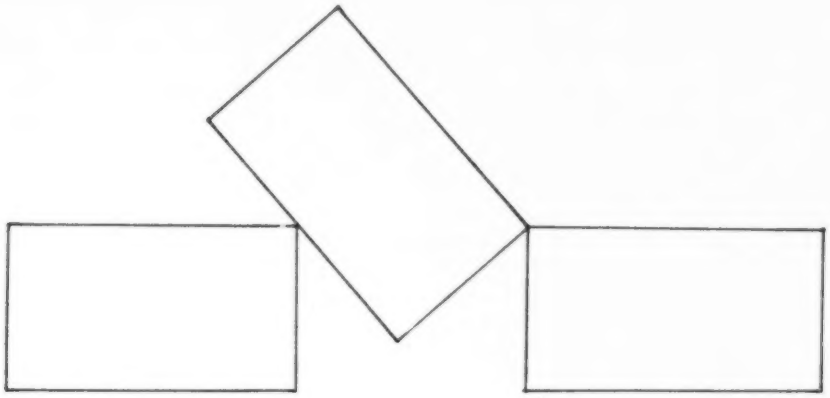
The diagram can vary from a simple exercise:

e.g. Draw a small square (1" x 1") alongside a circle 1" in diameter:



to much more involved diagrams:

e.g.



The neglect of listening as a vitally important communication skill remains a problem in our education system today. The best way to overcome the problem appears to be through the involvement of children in a wide variety of 'active' listening situations where they have to understand spoken messages in order to solve problems and arrive at satisfactory solutions. The emphasis should be on integrating listening programs as a vital part of language arts in all of the content areas in a similar way to reading. In this way, listening will not be treated as a separate entity, but will be incorporated as a major communication skill in all facets of learning.

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